

Traveller children, as a 'minority within a minority', face complex challenges of inequality and neglect in their access to early childhood education and care. This article provides an overview of recent developments towards meeting those needs at the levels of policy and structure. It outlines the key strategies at play and makes recommendations for future action.

When you consider the passage of a child's life, choosing to do little or nothing over consecutive years amounts to serious neglect of Traveller children's right to a supported childhood under harsh and inadequate conditions. (Murray, 2020)

For decades, no concerted effort has been made to investigate, develop, and implement appropriate interventions to meet the needs and rights of young Traveller children in Irish society. As a 'minority within a minority' (Murray, 2012), Traveller children have rights that are intrinsically linked to their family's rights, including their provision rights. It is no secret that Travellers have endured unacceptable living conditions that violate international human rights and children's rights (UNCRC, 2016; OHCHR, 2019). In the past 18 months, Covid-19 has placed a spotlight on many issues of inequality for the Traveller community, including in education, health, and accommodation.

In May 2021 the Ombudsman for Children's Office published its report 'No End in Site: An Investigation into the Living Conditions of Children Living on a Local Authority Halting Site' (OCO, 2021). The report outlines the conditions of 66 Traveller children and their families living on a halting site in Cork. The investigation found there was 'a failure to consider the best interests of children, including those with additional needs, and to ensure that children living on the site enjoy a safe, suitable standard of accommodation' (ibid., p. 8). While the findings are not surprising, as the inadequate living conditions of Travellers have been evident for decades, it is a very welcome report. At its launch, the Ombudsman for Children, Dr Niall Muldoon, said:

The conditions we found on the halting site in question were deplorable. To think that children in Ireland in 2021 are living like this is utterly shocking. Under no circumstances can this be accepted or allowed to continue.

Traveller Pride in Early Childhood Education and Care



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Neglect is also evident in the Children's Rights Alliance (CRA) Report Cards, where government promises and responses to Traveller issues and rights have, over 10 years, moved between an E and a D grade until in 2018 a D+ was awarded, based on Traveller recognition as an ethnic minority. In 2021 a D+ grade was given (CRA, 2021). The grades allocated are based on analysis of how the government performed in meeting its commitments to the Programme for Government.

If we also consider the levels of discrimination and racism to which Travellers are subjected, at both individual and structural levels, we have a situation that requires immediate action. In 2016 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its concluding observations, said that Ireland needs to 'strengthen its efforts to combat discrimination against and stigmatisation and social exclusion of Traveller children' (UNCRC, 2016, p. 6). This accumulated neglect has damaging consequences for young Traveller children's life chances (Murray, 2020).

You might ask why we are addressing issues of accommodation, government policy, responsibility, and discrimination and racism in a paper on early childhood education and care (ECEC). Because our focus is on young children (from birth to six years), we believe that addressing critical social-justice issues is an essential ingredient in delivering high-quality ECEC training and practice, but it also requires commitment and leadership at ECEC policy level.

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Traveller children's lives are rooted in their lived experiences. The intersectional nature of the challenges facing the Traveller community must be addressed holistically and systemically. It is important for those working in the ECEC sector to be aware of, to understand, and to respond to the specific needs and rights of Traveller children, which includes addressing racism.

Two key strategies with the potential to make a difference for Traveller children are the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017–2021 (NTRIS) (Department of Justice and Equality (DJE), 2017) and First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families 2019–2028 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018). They include cross-referenced but limited actions for young Traveller children to enhance deliverability of services, including accommodation, play areas, and ECEC.

NTRIS promotes the use of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) pre-school scheme from age three to the start of school, as well as the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) for children with a disability, in the Traveller and Roma communities (DJE, 2017, p. 25). The action is primarily about access, which is important because we know from experience that not all Traveller children are attending or consistently attending the ECCE scheme.

Unfortunately, the only data available comes from the Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report published by Pobal (2021). We acknowledge the importance of having some indicative (albeit proxy) data for ECEC. There is, however, a dearth in disaggregated data generally for young Traveller

children which is needed to inform and target service provision more broadly. It will be important that the new NTRIS 2022+ have clear, targeted actions for young children beyond access to the ECCE scheme.

Two new and important reports refer to Traveller children, ECEC, and the need for specific training to support Traveller children's participation in ECEC. The first is the OECD's 'Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland: Review on Sector Quality' (OECD, 2021). This report recommends that 'ECEC staff would benefit from more knowledge and training on the specific needs of children from Traveller and Roma communities' (p. 35). It also recommends that further efforts be made to address 'other sources of disadvantage in ECEC, in particular for the inclusion of children from Traveller and Roma communities' (p. 16).

The second report is the 'Oireachtas Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community Report' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021), which recommends that 'awareness and cultural competency training should be provided for childcare professionals' (p. 38), in keeping with the NTRIS theme that there should be 'a positive culture of respect and protection for the cultural identity of Travellers and Roma across the education system' (DJE, 2017, p. 28). The report also calls for specific training, recommending that intercultural and anti-racism training be rolled out to all serving teachers as a mandatory part of their continuing professional development.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) already rolls out Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) anti-bias training, which is grounded in an anti-racism approach, through the City and County Childcare Committees. The training needs to include further components, including a focus on Traveller children. We have previously recommended that the training should be mandatory and its length increased as part of the Workforce Development Plan (WDP) consultation.

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The final development plan has just been published (DCEDIY, 2021). The DCEDIY did not, unfortunately, include the mandatory recommendation but has committed to a review and further roll-out of the training. It states that the training will be 'facilitated by developing an online format for the training' (p. 99). This training was built on *éist* training, which is experiential in nature and was developed and evaluated over a long period (Pavee Point, 2004–2010; Duffy & Gibbs, 2013). This training, to have quality and effective outcomes, should at least be blended in delivery, in keeping with the WDP recommendation for *Siolta* training (action 30, page 97). In regard to facilitating deep reflection on critical diversity issues, including cultural competence and anti-racism, the online format is limited and can be ineffective.

We welcome the recommendations for a greater focus on training for ECEC educators on Traveller issues and anti-racism in recent publications. In moving forward, we recommend several areas for action:

- A National Traveller Education Strategy should be developed and implemented, and should include ECEC.
- Disaggregated data is required to target and progress service provision.
- The review of the DEI training should include a Traveller component.
- The DEI training should be blended, and all ECEC services should complete the training.
- Clear targets and actions for ECEC and young children should be developed in NTRIS 2022+.
- ECEC services should be monitored to determine whether ECEC frameworks and guidelines are working for Traveller children. This information should be published.

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